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7,000 Miles Underground:

or, Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring
a Volcano.

By "NONAME."



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Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring a Volcano.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Chasing a Pirate," "Frank Reade, Jr., in Cuba," "Frank Reade, Jr., in Japan," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

HELD UP BY BANDITS.

ONE evening the stage coach which ran between San Pedro and the mining town of Broken Knee was going through a mountain canyon. Beside the gray bearded old driver sat a slim young man clad in a bicycle suit of gray, his face clean shaved, and a pair of eye glasses upon his nose.

"So you're a newspaper reporter, hey?" the driver was asking him, as he turned his raw-boned old team into the middle of the pass.

"Oh yes," responded the individual in the bicycle suit. "My name is Nick Squibbs, Esquire, and I'm the writer for the New York Herald who was recently sent West to explore the Great Cave of Volcano Mountain, my boy."

"Ther deuce yer wuz!" ejaculated old Hickory, with a frown. "I advises yer ter give up ther job then, sir, if yer wants ter go home alive."

"Why so?" asked the young reporter with a smile.

"Cause it's ther cussedest hole in ther hull range o' ther San Jacinto Mountains. Thar never wuz but one critter wot ever came out o' that death trap wi' a hull skin, an' it wuz his account wot sent others thar ter sartin death."

"That's just it," coolly said Mr. Squibbs, in satisfied tones. "You could not have said anything that would have induced me more to explore that cave, for I want to find out the cause of the mysterious disappearance of everyone who has gone into that big hole in the ground."

"Waal," snorted old Hickory, darting a quizzical look at his companion. "You air ther strangest feller wot I ever seen."

"Humbug! If a man hasn't got a cast iron nerve he can never succeed as a reporter on a New York daily. He'd get the merry 'Ha, ha,' in no time if he failed to carry out his assignment—"

"Wot's ther merry ha-ha mean?"

"Why—the marble heart—the glassy eye, and the frozen hand."

"I reckon as I don't understand yer, youngster."

Nickodemus Squibbs burst out laughing, and as the tones of his voice pealed through the silent canyon, it set the four passengers inside the coach wondering what caused his jollity.

The last note of his voice had scarcely died away, when of a sudden a dozen men, armed and masked, sprang from behind the adjacent rocks and bushes, and rushed toward the stage coach.

"Road agents!" gasped the driver in alarm.

"By jingo! This is nice!" Nick exclaimed.

"Halt!" yelled the leader of the gang.

He sprang to the horses' heads and grasped the reins at the bits, suddenly checking the startled team.

The passengers stuck their heads out the side windows of the coach, and saw at a glance what was transpiring.

Nick pulled a revolver from his pocket and leveled it at the man who had just stopped them.

"Let go those horses!" he shouted, angrily.

"You drop that gun, or they'll riddle us!" gasped Hickory.

"Not an inch! I mean to defend myself!" was the cool reply.

The veteran driver jumped to the ground and discreetly raised his hands above his head in token of submission, for he had been held up before, and knew the value of not resisting.

"Do you hear me!" Nick roared at the bandit.

"Fire at him, boys!" shouted the outlaw to his men.

Bang! Bang! came several rifle shots.

The sput—sput! of the bullets, as they flew past the gallant reporter's head made a sickened feeling creep over him.

But he did not flinch.

On the contrary, he opened fire.

Crack!

A yell of pain escaped the bandit who held the team.

He reeled, and fell writhing to the ground, crying:

"I'm shot!"

"Come down from thar!" growled Hickory.

"Not till I give them the quieting pill," replied Nick.

And—bang—bang—bang! rattled his revolver.

He was a good shot too, for each time he fired a man screamed and showed evidence of having been wounded.

The outlaws fired back wildly with their rifles, for they did not expect such a determined and deadly resistance.

Several more shots from the plucky reporter's pistol scattered them, and they slunk behind the shelter of trees and rocks again.

"D'yer want'er git plugged, yer leetle fool!" roared Hickory, nervously.

"No, I can't say I'm anxious to get the whistling bullet."

"Come down yere then, I tell yer!"

"Guess I shall, as those beggars are out of sight now. What a capital article this will make for my paper!"

And with a reckless laugh, he leaped to the ground.

"Inter ther coach wi' yer!" advised the old driver, who could not help admiring Nick's utter indifference to danger.

"No, no! We'd be cooped up there, my boy."

"It's some protection, lad; here thar's none."

"That's so! I don't want to give them the bulge on me."

As the coach door was thrown open, both scrambled in just as a murderous volley was poured at them by the concealed bandits.

The flying bullets struck all around them, some crashing into the heavy oak boarding of the old stage coach.

All the occupants were men, and each one went armed.

Two were ranchmen, and the others were a lawyer and a store-keeper from Broken Knee.

"Gentlemen," remarked Nick, "you've got to fight."

"Three at each window and blaze away," said the lawyer. "I've got a valuable stock with me, and mean to defend it."

"Can't see the villains," said the store-keeper, peering out.

"Rip up them bushes," advised one of the ranchmen.

His companion had a Winchester and let drive with telling effect, and the others followed suit.

Every few moments shots pealed from the windows of the coach, only to be answered by the rifles of the hidden bandits.

Bullets were flying like swarms of hornets.

Inside half an hour the two ranchmen and the lawyer were wounded, and rendered unable to keep up the fight.

"Them yere blamed skunks ain't a-goin' ter let up till they've nailed ther hull crowd of us," said the driver restlessly.

"They are bum shots," replied Nick scornfully; "and I've noticed that they are closing in on us gradually from all sides."

"We're going to have a hot time of it in a few minutes then," said the store-keeper, and the wounded men groaned.

The firing continued for some time.

Presently the expected assault was made.

All the bandits who could, charged with a rush.

Quick and sharp came an exchange of shots, but it was useless for the gallant defenders, for the rascals outside were determined.

Reaching the coach, they cut the horses' traces and overturned the vehicle with a violent crash.

Nick was keenly watching them, and as the coach went over he sprang out, struck down the nearest man, and ran for a horse.

Several shots were fired at him, but beyond inflicting a slight wound in his side, they did no harm.

Up on one of the horses he leaped, and away he dashed down the canyon like a thunderbolt.

The outlaws yelled, and several pursued him.

He might have escaped had not the horse stumbled and fell, throwing the brave fellow headlong to the ground.

Partially stunned, he laid like a corpse.

A wild, exultant howl escaped his enemies, and they rushed toward him, thirsting for vengeance upon the brave fellow.

But before they reached him a singular event occurred.

There sounded the rapid ringing of a bell, the rattle and clash of wheels, and a peculiar vehicle dashed into view, coming through the canyon at a tremendous speed.

It was an electrical traction engine on four wheels, with a deck-house of metal and a glass dome forward, in which was a steering wheel, held by a magnificent looking youth.

Upon the platform outside the turret stood a diminutive negro and a red-headed Irishman, each of whom were armed with peculiar rifles.

"It's a hold-up!" cried the youth at the wheel, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Bejabbers, thim spalpeens bes killin' ther passengers, Frank," replied the jolly-looking Celt, in anxious tones.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Barney," exclaimed the coon. "Fire at dem."

"I'm ready, Pomp!"

They raised their repeating rifles and fired several shots.

No sound but the thud of air and shriek of flying projectiles escaped the weapons, but when the bullets struck they exploded with deafening reports, as they were charged with dynamite and flew in fragments.

The bandits were alarmed at the electric wagon, and the appalling effect of those deadly air rifles increased their fear.

Forgetting their plan to rob the passengers of the stage coach, they dashed away, mounted their horses, and galloped down the canyon.

Like an avenging Nemesis the electric coach pursued them, the negro and the Irishman sending shot after shot flying after the panic-stricken gang, dropping several in their tracks.

It was an exciting chase.

Some of the desperadoes recovered their wits enough to turn in their saddles and hurl back a promiscuous fire.

The coach was made of bullet proof aluminum, however, and was not injured, but a ball crashed through the glass dome and struck the youth at the wheel.

A cry of pain escaped him.

His hands relaxed from the spokes and he fell to the floor.

"God save us!" gasped Barney, turning deathly pale. "Is that the ind av Frank Reade, Jr.?"

The coach was running wild and threatened to smash against the rocks, as there was now no hand to guide it.

Seeing the danger, and wild with alarm over the fate of their leader, the Celt and the darky flung open a door in the dome and rushed inside.

Frank lay bleeding upon the floor.

While the Irishman bent over him to ascertain the extent of his injury, the darky grasped a lever and cut out the electric current, bringing the motor to a pause.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW PASSENGER.

"BARNEY, what has happened?"

"Sure it's sinseless ye wor knocked, Frank."

"My head pains dreadfully."

"An' no wondher. A bullet grazed yer skull."

"I see. I'm wounded and bleeding."

"So yer are, bad cess to thim spalpeens. But I've bandaged yer head, an' it's tin minutes be ther clock that I've been workin' over yer, ter win back yer sinces."

Frank Reade, Jr., rose to his feet.

He was a powerful young fellow, with fine features of an intellectual cast and had a quick, cool temperament.

Rich and addicted to inventing peculiar contrivances, Frank had built and equipped the Snap (as he named the wagon) for a long journey down to the border of New Mexico.

His two companions were faithful friends, who always accompanied him, and were addicted to playing practical jokes.

Pomp now entered the dome.

"How am yo' now, honey?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh, I'm all right. It was only a slight wound," replied Frank, rising.

"Bress de Lawd fo' dat!"

"Where are the outlaws?"

"Done runned away, Massa Frank."

"So much the better."

"Dar's de young man alyin' clus by."

"Bring the poor fellow aboard."

"Yassah."

And off hastened Pomp to secure Nick.

Frank peered through a window and saw the darky lift the reporter aboard the car.

The young inventor observed that the rest of the passengers of the stage coach were crouching behind the overturned vehicle with their weapons held in readiness for use.

"They seem to be all right," he muttered, "so I'll make our position perfectly secure against another attack."

He thereupon drew a metal shutter over the glass dome.

The coon, having brought Nick aboard, found him fast reviving, and by the time Frank and Barney reached the rear room into which the darky carried the reporter, he had recovered his senses.

Sitting up and ruefully rubbing his head, he glanced around in some surprise, and then vented a long-drawn whistle of amazement.

"Jerusalem!" he exclaimed.

"Specs yo' am s'prised, eh?" chuckled Pomp.

"Well, I confess you've given me the glad smile."

"Done broke yo' haid, sah?"

"Pretty near; pretty near, my dusky friend. The fact is, however, that I'm blessed with a cast iron skull, and it would require nothing short of a sledge and wedge to crack it open."

"Gosh amighty, am yo' a museum freak?"

"Not exactly. But I'm a reporter, and my name is Nick Squibbs, Esq. It ought to be Josh, though, for I've been horribly Joshed by the grangers, who sought to Jesse James me."

"Dat's a fact," admitted Pomp with a grin.

"Now where am I, and who are you people?"

Pomp introduced all hands.

Then Frank said:

"I've built this electric vehicle to explore a wonderful cave in the mountains in the interest of a scientific society I belong to."

"Do you allude to the Great Cave of Volcano Mountain?"

"I do."

"That's funny."

"What is?"

"I'm going there myself."

"What for?"

"The newspaper I represent."

"Ah, I see."

"This machine interests me. I'd like to go with you."

"As our purpose is the same, you may do so."

"Can I? Now that's kind of you, I'm sure."

"You'll have to work your passage, though."

"I expect to. More—I'll pay you—"

"Not a cent," interposed Frank, quickly.

"Very well. Here's where I shake the stage coach."

"Were any of your companions injured by the bandits?"

"Yes—three were wounded."

"Let us go to their assistance then."

"Are the outlaws gone?"

"Oh, they won't bother you again, for I'll guard the vehicle till it's well out of danger from them."

"I've heard of you often, Mr. Reade, but I'll be hanged if I ever knew till now what a generous chap you are."

Frank smiled and glanced around the compartment.

"This is our engine room," said he, to change the subject.

"What are those machines?"

"One is a gasoline engine. A large tank under the wagon contains the liquid for running it, and another tank holds our drinking water. The engine runs this small powerful dynamo. We get current enough from the generator to work the motor controlling the wheels, light all the incandescent lamps and search-lights, and to heat our cooking stove."

"Extraordinary!"

"Do you think so?"

"What speed has this car?"

"Fifty miles per hour over fairly good ground."

"Phew! This beats locomotives all to smash!"

"The car is very comfortable and convenient."

"How so?"

"Well, it's fifty feet long by ten broad, and this amount of space gives us the steering turret, this engine room, a big room for mess and sleeping, and a storeroom where Pomp does the cooking."

"I see. The machine is simply a wonder."

"It suffices for our purpose."

"Have you any ulterior object in going to the cave?"

"Yes. I've heard it conceals the source of all of Montezuma's gold. If I find a claim there I'm going to stake it."

"Yes, and there's another point about the place which, in my opinion is one of the most wonderful things on record."

"To what do you refer, Mr. —"

"Oh, call me Nick."

"Well, Nick, then."

"That sounds better—less formal, you know."

"Answer my question."

"I referred to the depth of the cave."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Only from hearsay. There is a belief among the natives in its vicinity that the cave leads to the center of the earth."

"What?" exclaimed Frank, in amazement.

"It's a fact."

"This is wonderful."

"Doubtful, too."

"But we may be able to test it with this wagon."

"So we could!" cried Nick.

"I intend to do so, you can depend."
 "Won't it be a very dangerous trip?"
 "Most decidedly. You must know it's over seven thousand miles to the center of the globe. The deeper you go the hotter it becomes. Some people assert that the core of the world is in an incandescent state yet. That fact, of course, would prevent us penetrating to the center. Moreover, other things prohibit it."

"What—for instance?"
 "The laws of gravity would not permit it. Then the density or pressure of the air would be unbearable. Besides, the carbonic acid gas would asphyxiate us."

"Well—presuming that this cavern leads far into the bowels of the earth, ain't you going to go down as far as you can?"

"I am," replied Frank, with a nod.
 "That settles it, then. I don't care a continental about the gravity, air-pressure, or the gas, so long as we make the attempt."

"Why are you so anxious about it?"
 "Simply because I'm wild to get an article for my paper on that extraordinary point, Mr. Reade."

"Well," said Frank, "let's run back to the stage coach and relieve the distress of your companions. We can speak further upon the subject of the great cave after they are taken care of."

"By all means, sir."
 They saw no more of the bandits then.

Returning to the turret, they passed through the kitchen and dining-rooms, and Nick observed how handsomely appointed they were, and what a large amount of provision was carried.

Once in the dome, Frank pushed a lever completing an electric circuit, and the propelling mechanism was started.

As the Snap rolled ahead the inventor grasped the polished aluminum steering wheel which controlled the front wheels, and turning the vehicle around, he steered her toward the stage coach.

The broad, flat, cogged wheels ran lightly over the rough ground, and the well adjusted springs caused the coach to ride like a buggy. Reaching the travelers, the machine paused.

Frank and his companions alighted.
 After a conference with old Hickory, the coach was righted, the remaining horse was hitched to it, and a rope was secured to the vehicle and tied to the Snap.

In this manner Frank dragged the vehicle along, and in due time she passed from the canyon to the plain.

It did not take long to get the vehicle to Broken Knee, where the appearance of the Snap created the most profound astonishment among the miners.

Here our friends left the coaching party.
 With Nick aboard as a passenger, the electric vehicle rolled from the settlement, followed by the good wishes of all the miners.

"And now for the big cave," said Frank. "We have not got a great distance yet to go, and then to begin our perilous undertaking."

CHAPTER III.

ELECTRIFYING THE INDIANS.

"BEGORRA, it's a whirlwind after us, Frank!"

"What do you mean, Barney?"

"D'yer moind ther cloud of dust behind?"

"Yes—that's queer."

"Sure, it's been foll'yn' us this quarther av an hour."

"Just stop the wagon till we see what it is."

It was late in the afternoon, two days later, when this dialogue occurred, and the Irishman cut out the current, and the electric machine came to a pause beside a woods.

She had been following a well defined trail and her crew gazed back expectantly, not knowing what to think of the large cloud of dust rolling along after them.

The wagon had arrived at a peculiar section of the country in San Diego.

Having crossed the Southern Pacific railroad near White Water, she had run into the beautiful valley lying between the Bernadino and San Jacinto ranges of mountains.

Their destination lay midway down the valley, and they were then upon the crest of a steep declivity, at the base of which there ran a broad, sparkling stream of water.

Frank paid but little heed to the scene ahead, as he was intent upon watching the strange cloud of dust that rose from the alkali plain over which it was rolling.

Within a few minutes he discerned some figures.
 And after a close scrutiny he suddenly exclaimed:

"Indians—on mustangs!"

"Ther deuce!" ejaculated Barney.

"Yes—they must be a roving band of Mojaves."

"Is it paiseable they are?"

"No, I believe not. But we'll soon discover."

He directed a glass at them, and soon saw that there were over two score of the savages coming along like a troop of cavalry.

They carried lances that rose in bristling array, rising and falling with the movements of the rough riders.

Then Frank distinguished other weapons.

"Arrows, knives, tomahawks, rifles!" he exclaimed.

"Faith, it's a regular arsenal they bes."

"More—their copper colored bodies are streaked with red and black war paint, which gives them a most hideous aspect. They are almost nude, and each brave has a solitary eagle feather rising from his coarse, black hair."

"Sure that looks loike mischief."

"Yes, indeed. They are on the war-path."

"An' is it a shindy we'll have wid thim?"

"More than likely."

"Thank ther Lord fer that! Sure I'm gettin' roosty fer ther want av a scrap, an' here's me chance at last."

"We will quickly find out now——"

"Whoop!"

A strange cry from the oncoming band interrupted him, and it was a genuine war whoop such as only an Indian can utter.

The cry made a queer sensation pass over the wagon crew, and brought Pomp and Nick into the turret with a rush.

"Trouble?" asked the latter.

"Not yet," Frank answered.

"Gwine ter need our weapons, Massa Frank?"

"You might get them ready, Pomp."

On came the savage band, and all doubt about their intentions was set at rest when they set up a general yell, and began to shoot their arrows toward the wagon.

Indians are bad archers at long range.

But they can fire twenty arrows a minute, and the shower of barbed shafts that struck and flew by the wagon was enormous.

Frank closed the shutters.

Not knowing that they had been looking through glass at our friends, the warriors had felt confident of hitting the travelers.

Now, however, they realized their error.

"Shall I shtart ther Snap?" asked Barney.

"No—not yet," Frank replied.

The Indians galloped up to the machine and sent their ponies around it, shouting, brandishing their weapons, and sizing up the vehicle in evident surprise.

"We've given them the grand razoo!" laughed Nick, as he peered out of one of the circular windows at them.

"They are surprised," Frank admitted.

"Dey kain't make her out zackly," added Pomp, with a grin.

Just then the savages hurled a volley of missiles at the machine, and a tremendous clatter ensued.

Nothing was broken, however.

"Go it, ye devils," cried Barney, grimly. "But it's nothin' yez will gain be all ther poundin' yez kin do."

"Some of them are dismounting," said Frank.

"Am dey gwine ter come abo'd?"

"Yes, Pomp, but I'll drive them off easily."

"Do ther shindy begin?" anxiously asked Barney.

"No; wait."

Some of the savages now began to climb upon the Snap, and as the rest saw no resistance, they followed suit.

Then they began to pound upon her on all sides, and made a special effort to burst in the side doors.

Frank smiled disdainfully at them.

"They can't get in that way," he remarked.

"By golly, dey am bagin' like pile-dribbers, sah."

"Just watch them and you'll see me make them jump."

As Frank spoke he pulled a plug out of a cut-out hole in the switch-board, and turning to his friends, he said:

"Stand on the rubber mats."

"Wha' fo'?" asked the con.

"To insulate your bodies; I'm going to turn a current of electricity into the body of the wagon."

The others obeyed him, and he changed the plug.

The moment he did so a heavy current shot into the vehicle, and as the natives had bare feet they got the full benefit of it.

An awful uproar ensued.

They yelled, danced and jabbered furiously.

Filled with agony, some rolled and squirmed on the metal plates, while others wisely leaped to the ground and ran away.

A roar of laughter escaped the inmates of the coach.

They could plainly see through the windows all that occurred, and the young inventor remarked:

"I think this must be their first experience with electricity."

"Sure it's would they are complaitly," chuckled Barney.

Frank increased the force of the current.

The antics of the savages became terrific.

"I guess they will give us the respectful go-by in future," said Nick laughingly. "They must look upon us as a pretty hot tomale."

"Done took all de spunk outen 'em," added Pomp.

"Let's see if they'll sheer off now," said the inventor.

He cut off the current.

Instantly the agony of the Indians ceased.

With laughable haste they sprang from the car, rushed to their mustangs, and dashed away at a gallop.

In a few moments the last man went clattering down the trail, and not a weapon was discharged.

"I'll keep them moving now," said Frank.

He started the Snap.

Away she dashed in pursuit of the warriors.

Filled with horror when they saw her coming, they yelled and urged their horses along at the top of their speed.

Barney uttered a regretful sigh.

"D'ye moind that now," said he. "All gone, an' bedad I didn't aven git a welt at wan av their heads!"

"What a pity," laughed Frank.

"Well, it's hopin' I am we may mate wid thim agin."

"I doubt it," replied the inventor.

The Mojaves reached the stream far in advance of the electric wagon, and driving their mustangs into it, sent them over.

Reaching the other side they dashed among some trees and vanished, filled with a superstitious dread of the Snap.

Frank was obliged to keep the vehicle in the middle of the trail, as it was bounced on each side by an embankment.

She soon gathered such rapid headway that he had to shut off the current and seize the brake handle.

"Bedad, it's a moile a minute we're makin'," observed Barney.

"I'll have to hold her in check," answered Frank, "for it won't do to let her run into that stream, as it may be so deep as to sink her."

"Dem horses seemed ter swim ober," the coon commented, "an' dat am a pretty suah sign dat de water am berry deep."

"Yes, I noticed that," Frank replied.

He hauled the brake handle over.

A grating buzz ensued as the iron shoes began to clamp the tires of the hind wheels.

As the machine was going at a furious rate of speed, though, she did not slacken her pace at once.

Frank therefore pulled the brake over tighter.

Scarcely was this done, however, when there sounded a sharp snap, as the broken chain parted.

The handle swung over useless.

"Heavens! I've broken the brake!" gasped Frank in alarm.

His companions were startled.

"Can't you hold her?" asked Nick.

"No; I've lost all control of her!"

The wagon seemed to dart ahead faster, suddenly gathering speed, and rushed directly toward the stream.

Frank could not turn her to the right or left on account of the embankment on either side.

Everyone waited with nerves drawn in painful tension, and the wagon rushed on like an express train.

In a few moments it reached the stream.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE BIG CAVE.

"JUMP overboard!" shouted Frank.

Everyone had gone out on the side platforms as the vehicle drew close to the stream.

They complied without hesitation, for all could swim.

The water was dashed high into the air by the wagon as it ran into the stream, and the vehicle plunged ahead until it was in midstream before the resistance of the water caused it to stop.

Frank and his companions disappeared under the surface.

When the inventor rose, he shouted:

"Barney!"

"I'm orroight."

"Pomp!"

"Heah!"

"Nick!"

"Safe."

They soon grouped.

Close by was the electric wagon.

The upper part projected a few inches above the water.

"We can save her," was Frank's first comment.

"How?" eagerly asked the Irishman.

"I'll dive, get a rope from the store-room, tie one end to her, carry the other end ashore and we'll haul her out."

"Good fo' yo'!" chuckled Pomp. "We help you, sah."

"Very well."

"Won't the water injure her?" Nick asked.

"Temporarily, perhaps."

"How?"

"By wetting her field winding if the insulation is broken."

"How would that effect her?"

"It might short-circuit the dynamo, and burn out the coils."

"Oh—I see."

While speaking they had been swimming toward the machine, and soon reached her.

Then Frank dove under.

He was at home in the water, and possessed the remarkable faculty of being able to hold his breath nearly two minutes.

Having located the rear door, he reached and opened it.

To see was difficult, but he knew about where the coils of rope were, and reaching the locker, he secured one.

It unwound as he picked it up.

This was fortunate, for he would not be burdened with its weight.

Having quickly found the end, he got out of the room and rose.

He held the end of the line.

As soon as he recovered his breath, he said:

"Barney, take the end of this line ashore."

"Hand it over, me bye!"

Frank gave it to him, and he held it between his teeth and swam away.

"Pomp, let the line run through your fingers."

"Dat's jest what I is doin'."

"Good! When I get the other end I'll fasten it."

The Celt quickly reached the shore and waded out.

"Are yez ready?" he shouted.

"Just hold it there," replied Frank.

He hauled on the line till he got the end, then dove at the bow, and quickly found the front axle of the Snap.

It only required a moment's time to tie the line.

Once more at the top, his cheery voice rang out with:

"Haul taut, Barney!"

"Haul it is!" the Celt answered, obeying.

"Come on, boys, to shore."

"I hope those Mojaves won't see our difficulty and come back at us," said the reporter in troubled tones.

"I've gwine ter keep ma eyes peeled fo' dem," said Pomp.

Reaching the shore, they all grasped the line and hauled away with all their strength.

The machine would not budge.

Frank gave a whistle of surprise and muttered:

"Her wheels are stuck in the mud, I suppose."

"We can't move her this way," said Nick hopelessly.

"I'll fix it."

"Wha' yo' gwine ter do?"

"Get a block and fasten it to a tree."

"I'll get it," said Barney.

He swam out to the vehicle and secured what was wanted.

With this they finally managed to haul the wagon across the stream, and they gave a hearty cheer as it came from the water.

Frank hastily examined her.

"As I feared," he finally announced. "Her machinery is drenched."

"Then it wouldn't be safe to try to use it?" asked Nick.

"No—not till it's dry."

"Dat means a long stay heah, I specs."

"A day or two."

None of them fancied the prospect, but there was no help for it, so they spent their time drying the contents of the wagon.

Fortunately the food and water were in impervious lockers, and, therefore, escaped destruction.

Two days slipped by, and nothing was seen of the Indians.

At the end of that time Frank considered the mechanism dry enough to use, and a start was made.

The generator was put under low speed at first, but as it showed no sign of giving out, the revolutions were increased.

She ran down the valley.

Our friends were now treated to a peculiar scene.

On either hand were the extinct craters of numerous volcanoes, which at some remote period had been in active eruption.

They were now overgrown by trees and shrubbery of the most dense kind, showing that it had been a long time since the mountains had been in a state of eruption.

Occasionally towering cliffs were passed up on the ledges and in the indentations of which were the peculiar abodes of the strange race, now extinct, known as cliff dwellers.

It was a wild region, and beautiful to behold.

Frank sat on a stool loading a beautiful new rifle, and Pomp was at the wheel steering, when Barney darted into the turret.

"Where's me goon?" he asked, excitedly.

"Hello!" said Frank, looking up. "Any trouble?"

"No, but there's ther foineest bit av a deer beyant, an' it's a crack I'd loike ter git at it, fer I'm doyin' fer a taste av fresh meat."

"Shall I bring it down for you?"

"If you plaze. Lose no time, or—"

But Frank had darted out the door before the sentence was fairly completed, and standing upon the forward platform he gazed around.

"Barney—where is it?" he asked.

"Ahead—ter ther left there."

"Now I see it."

They were going through a wide ravine, and he caught view of the beautiful gray beast two hundred yards away.

It was browsing the luxuriant grass.

Just then it heard the approaching wheels, flung up its head with a startled look and eyed the machine curiously.

Frank raised his rifle.

Before he could aim the deer sped away.

It plunged through a dense mass of bushes and disappeared.

"Chase it, Pomp!"

"Yassah," replied the coon.

He swung the controller over, and a larger amount of electricity flashed through the resistance coils to the motor.

Away darted the Snap much faster.

By the time she reached the bushes, though, the deer was far down the valley, and running at a speed equal to that at which the wagon was going.

"Faster!" said the inventor.

"I dassen't," replied the coon.

"Why not?"

"De groun' am too rough."

"That's a fact. I'll try a flying shot."

Taking careful aim, he fired, and a cry of delight escaped his companions, for they saw the deer fall upon its knees.

"A magnificent shot!" enthusiastically said Nick.

"It's gettin' up agin!" roared Pomp, in disgust.

"Oh, I merely wounded it," said Frank.

The deer rushed away again toward a massive pile of stone at one side of the ravine, and sped into a dark opening like a huge doorway, the frame of which was of massive masonry, with a number of peculiar characters cut into them.

"Dar she goes inter de rocks!" cried Pomp.

"Did it enter a cave?"

"Looks mighty like a big do'."

As the machine rolled up to the aperture, Frank cried:

"Why, this is the entrance to the great cave, according to the description I've got of the place."

"You are correct," said Nick, intently eying the opening. "And here's where we begin our exploring trip—a journey from which only one in a thousand returns alive."

"Folly the baste in," said Barney. "D'yer want me ter be afther losin' me fresh meat?"

Pomp turned the current into the search-lights, and the wagon ran into the huge cavern.

It was a mighty chamber, wrought by some convulsion of nature at a very ancient period.

They saw that it was just a plain, big, rocky cavern, the floor of which sloped down into the bowels of a big mountain in the middle of the range.

Cutting through the gloom like knives, the search-lights brilliantly illuminated the scene.

Far ahead they saw the deer.

It was staggering, and Frank fired at it.

Following the deafening report, the deer leaped into the air and fell to the floor dead.

Pomp drove the wagon up to it.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE EARTH.

"HARK! What's that?"

"Done soun' like hosses' hoofs, Frank."

"Yes—and they're racing this way, too."

"Whar am Barney?"

"He alighted just now to pick up the carcass of the deer."

"Golly—looker dar, Massa Frank!"

The excited darky pointed out the window in the direction toward which the light was flashing.

A troop of wild horsemen were seen coming at a furious gallop through the cave toward the machine.

"Why, bless me if they ain't the very Indians we were chasing the other day!" exclaimed Nick, in amazement.

"They look like the same," replied Frank.

"Oh—fo' de Lawd sake—Massa Frank—Massa Frank!"

"What is it, Pomp?"

"Dey am gwine ter ride ober Barney!"

A startling scene met the inventor's view.

The Irishman had alighted and gone ahead to secure the deer.

As he stooped over the carcass, the savage horde came racing from the gloom directly toward him.

It seemed as if he would be trampled to death.

He was too far away for Frank or the others to render him any immediate assistance.

But the gallant Celt did not lose his wits.

He was only armed with a knife, but he clutched it tightly and sprang to his feet facing the horses.

There was no time to avoid the rush.

But he sprang aside, as the nearest mustang rose on its haunches, pawing the air over his head.

Then the keen point of his blade moved swiftly to and fro, spurring the flying animals right and left.

A shout rose from those braves who saw him, but they were so intent upon pressing ahead, and had so little opportunity to injure Barney that no weapons were directed at him.

Surrounded by the bewildering troop of rushing horses, Barney was hit several painful blows by the flying hoofs.

As the last of the cavalcade parted right and left, and swept by him, one of the animals knocked him down and trod on him.

He uttered a sharp cry of pain, and rolled over.

"Begorra, I'm kilt!" he yelled.

The car was rushing toward him, and the Indians were yelling with alarm, and trying to pass it as quickly as possible.

None of them had forgotten their experience with the electricity, and they had no desire to repeat the dose.

Pomp heard Barney's voice, and roared wildly:

"Fo' de lan' sakes, Barney, am yo' alibe?"

"No!" replied the Celt.

Frank and the reporter burst out laughing.

"He can't be very badly hurt," commented the inventor.

"Slack up—we are close enough to give him the helping hand."

Frank cut out the current.

Just then Barney got up on his hands and knees, and staring back into the dense gloom, he shouted:

"Howly mackerel—here come a gang av divils!"

A number of men on foot had suddenly come out of the darkness.

But such men!

They were all over six feet in height, with skin as white as chalk; their heads were covered with mops of long, yellowish white hair, and their bodies were likewise covered with a hirsute growth.

In a word they were hairy Albino giants of a race hitherto unknown to civilization, and were doubtless dwellers of this big cavern, and were against all trespassers.

They wore only breech clouts, and were armed with stone weapons or implements of peculiar design.

Upon discerning Barney the whole gang made a rush for him, and several seized him at the same moment.

"Lave me go, ye blackguards!" he roared. "Begorra it's the unfair advantage yez have av me!"

Paying no heed to his remarks, which they probably did not understand, they all wheeled around and sped away back into the cave once more, bearing Barney with them.

"Help! Help!" he yelled. "I don't want ter go wld yez!"

Frank witnessed the abduction.

It filled him with alarm for the Irishman's safety.

"Pomp!" he exclaimed, in quick, authoritative tones, "keep the search-lights trained upon them so they can't disappear."

"Yassah! Put on mo' current, honey, will yo'?"

"I'm going to give her every volt of force she's got, and I'll run down those fellows if it takes a week."

The speed of the wagon was increased.

"She's gaining fast!" exclaimed the reporter.

"Are you a good shot?"

"No."

"Can you steer?"

"Yes."

"Then hold her as she's going."

"Very good. What are you going to do?"

"See if I can wing Barney's captors."

He put the wheel in Nick's hands and grasped his rifle.

Two of the cave dwellers now carried Barney, and the young inventor drew a bead on the foremost man's legs and fired.

Barg!

A wild yell.

The Albino fell.

Barney immediately dropped to the floor.

Some of the men picked up their wounded companion, and away the whole party scattered and ran in every direction.

United, it was easy to follow them.

Divided they all managed to avoid the lights.

Frank stopped the Snap near the Celt, who had risen, and he hastily clambered aboard.

Pomp rushed out and helped him.

"Gosh amighty," he chuckled, "ain't I tickled ter git yo' back alibe!"

"Sure, yez ain't half as plazed as I am," replied Barney.

"Am yo' hurt?"

"Could twinty thousan' would horses thramp a man, an' not hurt him?"

"Specs not, honey. Come inside an' we tend ter yo'."

"Faith, I'm pounded to a jelly, an' ivery bone in me body is cracked. Did ye moind ther blaiched blonde min who gripped me?"

"I done flink dey was ghosts."

"An' I know they are."

They passed inside.

And only just in time.

A shower of large stones came flying through the air on all sides of the electric machine, and pelted her all over.

It was like a bombardment of cannon balls.

The heavy blows made her rattle and shake furiously, and the wonder was that some of them did not break the plates.

"Bedad, we've chaited them out av two wakes be comin' in here before them cobble shtones landed agin our heads," laughed Barney.

"Dey'll smash de hull wagon ter pieces soon."

"Don't you believe it," said Frank. "Get your guns."

When they had their weapons in readiness, Frank directed them to fire around promiscuously into the gloom.

A rattling volley followed.

That stopped the stone throwing.

"How are you hurt?" asked Frank of the Celt.

"Sure, I'm black an' blue from head ter fut—"

"Nothing worse?"

"Barrin' ther cuts an' bruises, nothin' worse."

"Go and attend to your injuries."

"I will," said Barney, and he disappeared in the back rooms.

Frank waited awhile, and hearing nothing and seeing nothing of the white men, he drove the wagon ahead.

"Now I can understand why no one comes out of this cave alive," said the inventor. "These Albinos seem to bitterly resent the intrusion of strangers here, and probably make away with everyone they have captured."

"They've given us the best evidence of that," replied Nick, "and it stands to reason that they've got a potent motive for acting so. Even the Mojave Indians were being driven out."

Frank nodded.

He had his own ideas about the matter.

The road ahead sloped downward at a steep angle, and there was not much use for the dynamo to drive the Snap ahead as she ran swiftly by her own weight.

He had repaired the brake, and now found it to be of the greatest service in controlling the machine.

As she rushed along the search-light lit up the path ahead, and showed Frank that the cave was beginning to show large numbers of stalactites and stalagmites.

These icicle-like crystals hung from the roof and rose from the floor in the most fantastic shapes.

Some were in the form of great pillars and columns, others formed various objects like church organs, human figures, etc., and all gleamed with the purest white color.

The place began to look like a fabled fairyland, and a most intense coldness prevailed.

Water was trickling from the points of some of the stalactites, and there were streams and pools upon the floor.

The cave seemed endless, all the while sloping downward.

Several miles were thus traversed, bringing the machine deep within the volcanic mountain and far under the earth's crust.

She finally reached a very steep descent and began to rush down, when the search-lights suddenly went out.

A wire had jolted from a binding post.

A profound gloom settled down.

Frank could not see where he was going and he at once began to apply the brake.

Before he could stop the Snap she struck an obstruction, leaped in the air, and seemed to be plunging off a ledge.

CHAPTER VI.

A DISPLAY OF ELECTRICITY.

CRASH!

The Snap landed.

It was somewhere in the gloom below where she had leaped from the ledge, and she struck another obstruction and turned completely over.

The cries of her inmates told that the shock had unnerved them, and not one of the four had escaped more or less injury.

The Snap rolled a moment, caught on her side and remained motionless, propped up by a rock.

After considerable time, Frank struggled to his feet somewhat dazed, and groped about to locate himself.

Everything was shrouded in gloom.

"Barney!" he called faintly.

"Am dat yo', Massa Frank?" asked Pomp.

"Yes. Where are the others?"

"Durno, but I specs dey am dead."

The silence of the Irishman and reporter was peculiar, and the inventor lit a match and cast a hurried glance around.

All the window panes were smashed.

He saw how the machine laid, and he observed that every portable object was flung out of place.

The floor was littered with a heap of rubbish made up of broken articles of all description.

But worst of all, Barney and Nick laid in the midst of the wreckage pale and motionless.

"Great Heavens—are they dead?" Frank gasped in alarm.

"I'll see," said Pomp, springing to their sides.

A moment of painful suspense followed.

The negro examined them.

Frank lit another match.

"Well?" he asked, in strained tones.

"Dey am bofe alibe."

"Thank goodress for that!"

"De shock done knock dem senseless, sah."

"Can they be gotten out of here?"

"Yassah. De do' am not jammed."

"I'll help you lift them."

It was a difficult task to get the two out, owing to the awkward position of the door, but they finally succeeded.

"Get some water, Pomp."

"I will if I can, honey."

And back to the coach hastened the coon.

He soon returned with a can of cold water, and Frank set about restoring Barney and Nick to consciousness.

They finally revived.

It was then ascertained that their injuries were not dangerous.

An inventory of their injuries was then taken, and it was found that, although everyone was cut, bruised and scratched, none had any bones broken.

"We will soon recover from these hurts," said Nick.

"Yassah, but how about de wagon?" Pomp asked.

"Frank do be examin' her wid a lantern now," replied Barney.

When his investigation was finished, the inventor joined them.

"Her running gear and frame are intact," he announced; "but some of the machinery is broken."

"Kin ye repair her?" asked the Celt.

"We can try," was the evasive answer.

"Dar am not a whole pane ob glass lef," said Pomp, dolefully.

"We must get her over upon her wheels," remarked Frank, "and then we can work inside of her."

They attended to their own injuries first.

This done, they got out the tackle, and quickly hauled the Snap upon her wheels, and braced her immovably.

Frank's first care was to repair the dynamo.

Without it they could not get light.

It occupied several hours to get it in running order, and then they occupied themselves with the other repairs.

The following day had dawned before they managed to get the machine in perfect order, and this could not have been done at all had not the inventor taken the precaution to carry a number of extra parts of the wagon with him.

The whole crew, completely exhausted, then turned in.

A much needed rest was secured.

It was toward the dawn of the following day ere they were aroused.

An unusual motion of the electric wagon was felt, and Frank ran forward into the turret and peered out the window.

To his surprise, he saw that the machine was running along down the steep grade at a rapid pace.

A score or more of the strange race of cave dwellers had hold of her, and were pushing, pulling and shoving her along.

Startled at the scene, Frank put on the brake and she slackened speed.

He finally stopped her and fastened the brake.

Then he pressed an electric push button, and an alarm bell set up a fearful clatter.

It brought Frank's friends to the turret.

"What's the matter—what's the matter?" was their cry.

"Those cave dwellers again. See!" said the inventor.

"Bedad, they're thryin' ter pull ther wagon along!"

"Yes, and I've stopped them."

"Can't you give them the grand bounce?" asked Nick.

"I'll make an effort," Frank answered.

He pulled a lever, breaking the circuit of a series of wires that formed a network about the Snap.

Then he turned a powerful current into the broken circuit, and a strange electric display ensued.

Leaping from the ends of the broken wire in the form of a greenish blue flame, the current shot out with a violent hissing noise from every break in the wire.

The whole machine was suddenly enveloped in a mass of these crackling big sparks.

And the effect was magical.

Everyone of the natives who came in contact with that artificial lightning was burned and electrified.

Hoarse cries of pain and fear peeled from their lips, and such a din arose that Frank's party was startled.

The cave dwellers used a peculiar dialect and their form of cries was unlike that of any other race.

Rushing away from the Snap, thoroughly frightened by the action of the electric fire, they melted away in the gloom.

But before they went Frank caught a good view of the eyes of the men who were nearest to the machine, and he noticed that the pupils were of a pinkish tint, like a rabbit's.

"From long residence underground, deprived of the sunlight, the coloring matter of their blood has failed and given them that ghastly white look," Frank mused. "Then by being born here for generations, they can now see in the darkness as plainly as I can in open daylight. I presume to say the sun would almost blind these people could they but see it."

When the last man was gone, Barney remarked:

"It do be lookin' ter me as if we'd have no paice wid ther likes av thim as long as we're in ther cave."

"We can't expect any," replied Frank.

"Am dey all gone?" asked the coon.

"Yes," assented Frank, "and they disappear here a great deal as fish do under water when you watch them from the interior of a submarine boat."

"Den mebbe I'se got time ter cook breakfas'."

"Go ahead, for I'm hungry," said Frank, nodding.

They dressed themselves.

As long as the fire was flashing outside, they had no fear of an attack by the natives, and ate their breakfast in peace.

When they returned to the turret they could not see anything more of the white men, and Barney took charge of the steering wheel and drove the machine along.

"I'm going to follow this cavern as far as it goes," said the inventor to his companions, "and as the bottom goes downward steadily, it is bound to lead us deeper into the bowels of the earth than any of us have ever been before."

"I quite agree with you," said Nick, "and I feel pretty confident that this huge boring through the crust of the world is directly due to an earthquake in ages past, or else it is the vent hole through which an ancient volcano poured lava out of the interior of the earth. Everything points to this conclusion."

Just then Barney shouted through the door:

"Daylight ahead!"

"What! Can it be possible?" asked Frank.

He joined the Celt.

Sure enough, a broad shaft of light was seen coming down through a monster opening in the roof of the cavern.

The wagon reached it presently.

Then they saw a strange scene.

At one side were several old wooden windlasses, perched on the rocks under the opening, upon the ground laid numerous rough mining implements, and beside them the skeletons of many human beings. One wall was completely perforated by hundreds of shaft openings.

Frank alighted as the wagon stopped.

Near by was a wooden bucket in the last stages of decay, and in it were numerous dark-colored lumps of stony appearance.

Frank picked one up and closely examined it.

Then he turned to his companions who had followed him, and said:

"Gold!"

"What—gold?" echoed Nick.

"Yes; this is a vast treasure—a wonderful mine. See the evidence of its having been worked ages ago. And these implements tell me as plainly as a book, that the skeletons are those of Aztecs."

"Then you think——"

"I know that this is the great mine from which the vast treasures

of Montezuma came, and its discovery will enrich us beyond the wildest dreams of the greatest millionaire!"

Frank's words created a sensation.

His companions saw, too, that he had not exaggerated the matter in the least.

CHAPTER VII.

RELICS OF ANCIENT BURIAL.

It was clear to Frank and his friends that the ancient Aztecs had procured their fabulous wealth from this mine.

The shaft through which they raised the ore by means of the old cumbersome windlass, was evidently in the bottom of the crater of an extinct volcano, as Frank saw by the aid of a glass.

"It is strange the gigantic Albinos, who dwell in this subterranean world, did not disturb these things," said Frank.

"Well," replied Nick Squibbs, reflectively, "these antiques will give me a fine subject to write upon for my paper, and bring me in the festive dollars by the handful."

"Yo' won't hab ter write no mo' if yo' git all de gole dat you want from dis yere mine," laughed Pomp.

"Faith," said Barney, "we ain't out av here ourselves yet, an' begob we won't git out, if thim whoite an' hairy gorillas get their cloutches upon us."

They returned aboard the Snap after awhile.

She was then driven along the descending floor of the cave, and sped on for several hours rapidly.

The floor still kept shelving downward.

Frank and his companions felt sore vet from the injuries they received by the wagon falling off the ledge, but their hurts were rapidly healing.

The machine presently ran into a shallow lake.

It was ice-cold water and as clear as crystal.

Here and there great stalagmites rose from the water like tree trunks of a beautiful pink color.

"How like human forms those things are!" Frank commented.

"Yes, indeed," responded Nick, as he eyed them curiously. "They are only the height and girth of a good-sized man. By Jove—see that one. It's perfectly human in outline."

"Don't it strike you as being very singular that there should be so many of them at this spot, and all of them of pretty near the same shape?" said the inventor, meaningly.

"It does, indeed."

"I think I shall investigate them closer."

"What's the use?"

"Oh, I've got a certain idea I want to satisfy."

"Very well. But what can you do?"

"Break one open."

"They are very hard."

"I know. You might term them petrified water."

"How do you expect to crack a column?"

"With a bomb. I'll show you."

The wagon was stopped twenty yards from a stalagmite.

Opening a locker, Frank took out a tripod upon which was affixed a small, steel, double tube to which considerable delicate mechanism was secured for the purpose of leveling.

It greatly resembled a surveyor's transit instrument.

Taking a long brass cartridge, loaded with dynamite, from a box, Frank carried the machine out on the platform.

"What do you call that thing?" asked Nick.

"This? A gun," answered Frank.

"A gun? Impossible."

"But it is, and it has a range of five miles."

"Humbug."

"You don't believe it, eh?"

"No. Powder enough could not be loaded in it."

"I don't use powder."

"What then?"

"Gas. This projectile is explosive."

"Oh—I see."

"Do you notice this little valve I've opened?"

"Yes."

"I pour in this white powder."

"Well?"

"Then I close the valve—so."

"What next?"

"By turning this thumb screw, I let a few drops of acid run in upon the white powder. That forms a powerfully explosive gas. Now I open the breech and thrust in the projectile, lock the breech and take accurate aim at my target by means of this compass, and the air bubbles in these levels."

"You interest me greatly."

"I've got the gun aimed at the top of that stalagmite."

"Well?"

"Now by turning this thumb screw I let the gas rush from the little valve to the rear of the gun barrel, and that shoots out the explosive shell without jarring and causing it to explode in the barrel."

"That's clever."

"Watch the mark."

Frank turned the screw.

A violent swish sounded at the muzzle of the gun.

It was instantly followed by a fearful explosion.

So powerful was the shot that it shook the cavern.

There was a blinding flash of fire at the stalagmite, and as Nick glanced at it, he observed that the top had been torn off.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed admiringly.

"Now have you faith in this gun?"

"I'd swear by it."

"Let's look at the broken column."

They had put on rubber boots and alighted.

Barney had the flame of the search-light directed squarely upon the object of their attention.

The moment they reached it Frank gave a cry of amazement.

"I'm right in my surmise!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" asked the reporter, putting on his eye-glasses and eying the broken column.

"This is a petrified man."

"Thunder!"

"See for yourself."

"Well, I'll be hanged if you ain't right!"

The material of which the stalagmite was formed had encased the human body in a shell two inches thick, and they could see by the interior that the corpse had been mummified by binding it with a wrapping of bandages steeped in natural pitch.

Frank also noticed that a wooden post was at the back of the figure.

"The ancients who put these bodies here," said he, "evidently tied them in an upright position to stakes."

"No doubt of it," replied Nick with a nod.

"The chemical action of the water that dripped down from the roof encased the corpses in this formation. With the air excluded, the bodies were preserved as you see them now, and I have no doubt they would remain preserved for centuries to come."

"It is all very strange," remarked Nick. "What a peculiar way to dispose of their dead!"

They returned to the Snap.

She passed through the shallow lake and finally left it and its grim array of petrified bodies far behind.

Toward nightfall (in the outer world) they reached a section of the cavern which was cut up into numerous beautiful grottoes.

Delicate pillars rose from the floor and were arched over and covered in places by a lattice work of perforated stone.

Peculiar creeping vines trailed over the ground, winding around the posts and festooning the floors.

There were velvety swards of long green moss covering the rocks, and low bushes upon which grew purple berries.

It was like an oasis in the general dearth of vegetation.

As the electric light flashed upon it, Frank exclaimed:

"Why—what a lovely spot hidden away here so far from the eyes of man! Let's pause here for the night."

"Faith it will be a relief ter stretch wan's legs here," said Barney.

"I'll gib yo' supper out dar if you want," Pomp suggested.

"Capital!" said Nick. "I'm in for it!"

The machine was stopped and they alighted.

Within one of the grottoes was a rock which served for a table, and they were soon at their supper and enjoying it.

"Watch me git ther nagur mad whin he comes to sit down," said Barney, with a grin, as he put a spoonful of salt in the darky's tea and placed a handful of tacks on the stone the coon was to sit down upon.

Frank was going to remonstrate with him, when Barney suddenly gave a howl and leaped to his feet in a frenzy.

"What ails you?" demanded Frank.

"Mother av Moses!" yelled the Celt, clapping his hand to his mouth.

Then he began to whistle.

After that he hopped up and down and pulled a horrible face.

"Are you crazy?" demanded Nick, in surprised tones.

"I'm afoire!" roared Barney. "Bring me a hose and rinch me mouth!"

"Yah—yah—yah!" roared Pomp's voice just then, and he cut a pigeon-wing and fairly screamed with laughter. "Dat's one on yo', Barney, ole mule!"

"Ther vagabone have filled me food wid red pepper!" groaned the Celt, "an' bad cess to him, I'll break his jure!"

"You're as bad as he is," replied Frank, suppressing a smile.

"Fer ther love av Heaven put a ton av ice in me mouth!"

"Haven't got any!"

Barney whistled again.

Then he made a rush for Pomp, swearing vengeance.

Away darted the coon through the grotto, with the irate Irishman in hot pursuit, and they dashed into the next grotto.

Straight through it they rushed at full speed, and as they passed out the road they both suddenly paused.

"Lor' Amighty!" gasped the darky, recoiling.

"What is it?" asked the startled Irishman.

A few feet away they caught an indistinct view of a huge object and a pair of glaring eyes.

There was a deadly look in those fiery orbs shining out of the darkness, and they heard a snuffing and deep growling.

"It's a woild baste av some koind," muttered the Irishman.

"How did it git in yere? An' what am it?"

Barney, of course, did not know.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIGHTING A SAVAGE BEAST.

"It's after us!"
 "Run fo' yo' life, Barney!"
 A deep, hoarse growl was heard.
 The huge body darted forward with a rush.
 Before Pomp managed to get out of the way it reached him.
 He was struck a fearful blow by a hairy paw that knocked him down, tingling all over.
 The coon was in a fever of alarm.
 He could not see what sort of strange beast it was that attacked him, and he yelled to Barney:
 "I'se a goner fo' shuah!"
 "Hit it wid yer fist," advised the Celt, excitedly.
 He forgot all about his anger at the coon when this queer and unexpected danger rose.
 "G'way dar! G'way dar!" roared Pomp.
 And as he felt the hot breath of the unknown creature puffed in his face, he dealt it a heavy blow in the face.
 "Frank! Turrun ther loight this way!" yelled Barney.
 He wanted to see what the brute was.
 It recoiled, growling angrily.
 Pomp was upon the point of rising, when down came the big hairy paw upon his breast.
 The coon was unarmed.
 Finding he could not get up, he fastened his fingers in the shaggy hair covering the beast.
 By this action he probably saved his life, for the creature was just about to fasten its teeth in his body when he seized it and baffled its intention.
 It tried to shake off the coon's grip.
 Pomp hung on tenaciously, however, and a fierce struggle for supremacy began between them.
 "Help! Help!" cried the darky.
 "Bad luck to it," replied Barney. "It's only a bit av a knife I have wid me, but I'll be after usin' it."
 He fearlessly advanced toward the struggling pair with the keen weapon clutched in his right hand.
 It was so gloomy there he could scarcely see the combatants, but once he found them he attacked the brute.
 At the first stab it snarled and recoiled.
 "Gib it to him, Barney!" implored the coon.
 "Begorry I'll carve him inter hash."
 "Ma Lawd, ain't he shakin' me!"
 "Have ye his teeth?"
 "No."
 "Thin lave go av his whiskers."
 The coon complied and got upon his feet.
 Just as Barney rushed at the animal, the search-light swung around and darted upon the creature.
 Barney saw what it was.
 "A bear!" he cried.
 The beast was of gigantic proportions.
 How it got down in the cave was a mystery.
 The light dazzled its eyes for a moment.
 Seeing his opportunity, the Irishman rushed at it and buried his knife in its neck.
 An awful cry escaped the beast.
 It rose upon its hind legs, and ere the Celt could move out of its reach it suddenly clasped him in a tight embrace.
 "Ow!" he roared, struggling to get free. "Ow, ye spalpeen!"
 "Fro' me yo' knife!" cried Pomp.
 The Celt dropped the weapon, and the coon seized it and attacked the bear from the rear.
 The animal was squeezing the life out of Barney when the knife blade pierced its back.
 Pomp stabbed it rapidly.
 With each knife thrust the bear uttered a violent roar, and, unable to stand the agony, it released Barney, dropped upon all fours, and rushed at the coon again.
 "Run!" shouted Barney.
 "Stan' back dar!" panted the coon.
 He had no time to get out of the way.
 Bracing his feet firmly, he clutched the knife with both hands and turned the keen point toward the bear.
 The brute blindly rushed against the weapon.
 It sunk into the animal's shoulder, and with a savage growl the creature staggered back and fell.
 The weapon was torn from Pomp's hand.
 "Bull's-eye!" he cried delightedly.
 "Sure, that baste is a fool," said Barney.
 "Dar he goes down!"
 "You've plugged his heart."
 "Ob co'se, dat's what I aimed fo'."
 "Get out, ye loiar, it wor an accident."
 The brute began to quiver all over.
 It sunk down to a reclining position, and its head swayed from side to side, its tongue hung out, and its eyes looked dazed.
 Then it rolled over on its side.
 It made several ineffectual attempts to rise.
 Finally its muscles relaxed, it stretched out, and was motionless.
 "Dead!" said Pomp. "Dead as a do' nail!"
 "Bedad, it's the great bear hunters we bes."

"Yo' mean me."
 "I mane ther two av us!"
 "Ah! what did yo' hab ter do wif it?"
 "It wor my furst shtab that did ther business."
 "G'wan! G'wan!"
 Then they began to quarrel over the matter, each one claiming the glory of having killed the bear.
 Indeed, they might have come to blows about it had not Frank made his appearance, armed with a gun.
 He saw the dead bear at once.
 "You don't need my aid, I see," he observed.
 "Indade we don't."
 "Did you have trouble?"
 "Not much. I kilt it wid wan tump."
 "No yo' didn'. 'Twas me," said Pomp, angrily.
 "Come, come, naygur, you know betther nor that."
 "Waal, if you amn't de biggest li—"
 "Shut up, ye smoked herrin', or I'll break yer jure!"
 "Try it!" defiantly retorted the coon.
 Barney squared off and danced up to him.
 The darky lowered his head and rushed at his tormentor at the same moment, and butted him squarely in the stomach.
 Barney was lifted from his feet by the force of the blow, and clapping his hands to the injured part, he doubled up like a jack-knife and fell to the ground.
 "I'm a coorpsel!" he gasped.
 "Now will yo' be good?" chuckled Pomp, as he darted away.
 Barney was wild.
 Scrambling to his feet, he shook his fist at Pomp.
 "Bad cess to ye," he roared. "I'll pay yez off fer that!"
 A mocking laugh was the only answer he got, and he finally returned to the Snap with Frank.
 The journey was resumed.
 Barney did not forget what the coon had done to him.
 He kept the matter well in mind.
 That night he and the darky were on duty together after Frank and the reporter turned in.
 They were passing a section of wall in which there were a number of round holes which aroused their curiosity.
 "Wondah what dey am, Barney?" asked the darky.
 "They couldn't be ther rasult av natur," replied the Irishman.
 "You fink somebody cut dem out?"
 "I do indade."
 "What am dat roarin' noise?"
 "It do be comin' from thim holes."
 Pomp's curiosity was intensified.
 He put on his hat, opened the door, and went out on the platform.
 As he did so, the slowly moving wagon arrived opposite another of the circular holes in the wall, and a fearful gust of wind flew out of it with a roaring sound and blew off the coon's hat.
 He tried to catch it, but it landed on the ground.
 "Golly!" he muttered, in dismay, "gwine ter lose my dicer!"
 He now realized that the roaring sound they heard came from a strong gale of wind blowing through the holes in the wall.
 "Barney!" he shouted.
 "Well, nagur?"
 "Stop de wagon; I'se done los' ma hat."
 "Orroight, me buck!"
 He cut out the current and put on the brake.
 Pomp jumped to the ground, ran back, and picked up his hat.
 Jamming it upon his head, he turned to return to the Snap, when, to his astonishment, he saw it moving rapidly away.
 "Hey! Hol' on dar!" he yelled, waving his arms.
 "If yez want ter git aboard again," replied Barney, with a broad grin, "ye will have ter catch her, ye ace av spades!"
 And he increased the speed.
 Pomp raced after the machine.
 Along rushed the Snap, and along galloped the pursuing darky as fast as he could run.
 The chuckling Irishman at times slackened the wagon's speed to encourage the coon, and then, just as it was almost within Pomp's clutches, he would drive her ahead faster and elude him.
 In this manner several miles were covered.
 Poor Pomp was panting and exhausted from his violent exertions, but he had to keep on running for fear of losing sight of the Snap in the gloom.
 He begged Barney to stop, but the Celt was obdurate, for he had not forgotten the bang in the stomach Pomp had given him with his hard, woolly head.

CHAPTER IX.

IN A DEATH TRAP.

"We are thirty miles beneath the earth's surface!"
 "Great Scott! How can you tell, Frank?"
 "By this French thermometer."
 "By what process do you calculate?"
 "The well established supposition that the temperature of the earth increases one degree, centigrade, for every one hundred feet of descent. In the cold, upper chambers of this cave I noticed that the thermometer was at 32 below zero. There are 6,075 feet to a mile. As the temperature has increased 60 degrees to each mile, the temper-

ature outside should reach the enormous heat of 1,584 degrees centigrade."

"But it don't; for that would mean 3,630 degrees Fahrenheit."

"No, it don't. As a matter of fact, it is at 212 degrees above the freezing point of water, and that is the boiling temperature."

"The heat here is something terrible. We can't stand it much longer, and that's a fact, despite the buzzing of all the electric fans in their efforts to keep us cool. Now, how do you account for the heat being less here than the amount at which the theory fixes it?"

"I'll tell you. The temperature standard was fixed by boring 973 yards—nearly half a mile—at Mondorf, in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, France. There was no draught to carry heat from a boring, so they fixed the temperature at what they found it there. Here, the opening is very large and the ratio of increased temperature is not so rapid. Besides, those blow holes carry off the heated air here and inject cooler air. It is to this reason alone that I attribute our ability to penetrate so far under ground. But we can't go much further without dying."

"I'm sure of that."

"It is estimated that the earth's crust is only 30 miles thick. If that is true we are beneath it."

Everyone was amazed.

More so, because the end of this strange passage was not yet in sight ahead.

The appearance of the place had assumed a most peculiar aspect now, for the air was full of mist.

Clouds of gases would float through this vapor and suddenly ignite, flame up with a violent report, consume themselves and die out.

Sometimes a sheet of hissing steam would burst from a fissure, pour out scaldingly into the passage with the force of an engine, and drench everything until the supply was exhausted.

Awful reports were heard in the earth on all sides.

They were deafening.

The noises came of the rocks splitting into great crevices without the slightest warning, and emitting the gases which rent them.

Everything was hot and wet.

The rocks were black and very slippery.

A continual rocking and quaking of the ground was going on and made it seem to Frank as if the passage would be engulfed or the earth tear itself to pieces at any instant.

"How little the people who live upon the surface of the earth suspect what awful convulsions are going on down here," thought the inventor. "It is lucky they don't. No one would have any rest night or day with this dreadful phenomenon going on in this manner all the time."

"It's no wonder there are volcanoes on the earth," said Nick, just then. "If there were no vents for all this gas and steam, the world would blow to pieces in no time from the expansion. And yet, our school books teach us that the incandescent interior of the earth is undergoing a continual cooling process."

"Reckon dat it's gvine ter take ten million yeahs fo' dis ole sweat box ter cool off," remarked Pomp, wiping the sweat from his face. "By golly, I nebber was so hot befo'."

"Yez had better turn back, Masther Frank," advised Barney, whose face was very red. "Sure it wuz only a flay boite for ther wagon ter run down hill this thirty moiles, but ye musht not ferget she won't be goin' back so fast up grade, an' wid ther ground that slippery yez could skate upon it."

"We shall have to go back," Frank answered, after a few moments' reflection. "Human nature can't stand much more of this heat. I feel now as if I was being boiled alive in a vat of hot water."

"Look at that boiling lake ahead there," said Nick, wiping the moisture from the window panes and peering out.

It was a vast expanse of water, the surface in a wild state of ebullition, and clouds of steam rising all over it.

Several mighty geysers spouted up from the middle, throwing their streams up to the roof, and the water poured down again with a sullen roar and beat the lake into foam.

"That water, if nothing else, would stop our further advance," said the inventor, "for it crosses the passage and blocks our way."

He turned the vehicle around.

"It should not take long ter raich ther top av ther wurruild agin if we've only garn down thirty miles," said Barney.

A smile crossed Frank's face.

"In other words, you imagine we have only got to travel thirty miles to get out of here, don't you?" said he.

"I do."

"Then you are woefully mistaken."

"How kin I be?"

"We have got to travel over two hundred miles."

"But I thought yer said we was only thirty miles down."

"So we are. But we did not go straight down, did we?"

"No; that's thrue, so it is."

"The slope was so gradual that we had to go a great ways to attain this depth. Look at the cyclometer."

"Jerusalem! It registers two hundred and forty-three miles."

"Well, that's the distance we traversed to get here, and as it's all up hill work now, it's apt to take us twice as long to get back."

"Lave her go, thin, for ther quicker we raich cool air, the more aisy I'll be, begorra. D'yer moind I'd have only ter shwally an egg an' it would bile in me shitomach."

The vehicle was put in motion.

Frank turned on every volt of electro motive force she could generate, and she ran along at a fairly rapid rate of speed.

There were many things against her now, though.

There were many small rises in the ground they traversed, up against which the wheels banged.

It shook and jolted the machine heavily; indeed, had she not been on flexible springs, riding in her would have been unbearable.

Frank retained the wheel first to learn how she acted, and he kept her moving as rapidly as possible.

The electric fans were whirling at a furious rate, but the interior of the vehicle was so hot that breathing was painful.

The Snap had not been going more than quarter of an hour when a heavier explosion than any they had yet heard roared through the passage.

Such an awful shock resulted that showers of dirt and stones fell down from the roof of the passage.

The vehicle was bombarded heavily.

A fearful heaving of the ground now was felt, and a terrible grinding and splitting of the rocks followed.

Then there came a mighty crash that made the floor tremble.

"What's that?" gasped Nick, in startled tones.

"Sounds like an earthquake," Frank answered.

"But dat bang done come from ahead," said Pomp.

"See there," said Barney, directing the light upon the passage.

Fifty yards in advance was a huge obstruction.

It had not been there before.

A thrill of dismay passed over Frank as he eyed it.

In a few moments the wagon drew so close that all hands could see what it was.

"Just as I feared," Frank muttered. "It's a mighty boulder dropped from the roof across the passage, and there is not room enough for us to pass."

"My Lawd! Am we in a trap, chile?"

"It looks that way."

"This is awful," sighed Barney, in tremulous tones. "Sure, I wuz in hopes av soon lavin' this chaldron av heat far behound, an' now it looks as if we'd lave our bones here."

Frank was intensely worried, but he did not say anything which would tend to discourage his companions.

Going out on the platform from whence he had an uninterrupted view, he calmly sized up the situation.

"That rock weighs hundreds of tons," he cogitated, "and it will take a tremendous power to remove it. If we do not get it out of our way the probability is that we shall perish here."

He paced up and down, thinking the matter over.

An idea finally entered his mind and he went inside again, and facing his anxious companions, he said:

"Cheer up, boys, there's a prospect of our working our way out of this living tomb, I think."

"How?" asked Pomp, eagerly.

"By blasting."

"Ah—yes."

"You recollect the powerful white powder I used in that gun? Well, we can drill that boulder in a hundred places, and, by constant blasting, finally tear it to pieces."

"Have yez enough of ther powder?"

"Well, my supply is limited," said Frank in hesitating tones, "but I think I've got enough for our purpose."

"How about a drill?" said Nick nervously.

"I've got one, and it will work rapidly if I attach it to our motor and run it by electricity."

"We've got a stupendous task to perform."

"Don't fear it, but work with a will, and it's within the range of human possibility we'll destroy that rock and finally force our way to the outer world."

The tools were procured.

Then the electrical connections were made.

Frank opened the door, and going out into the hot, clammy atmosphere, he set his drill to work upon the rock.

In a few moments the buzzing of the machinery began, and they worked furiously to save their lives.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREAT BLAST.

SEVERAL hours later the Snap was driven back half a mile, and Frank let out a pair of insulated copper wires, the ends of which were connected with wires, placed in series, attached to the blasting charges.

"Stop her, Barney!" he sang out, presently.

The Irishman cut out the current.

"Stopped she bes!" he replied.

"All hands lie down on the floor."

The others complied.

"Ready," said Nick.

"I'm going to fire the blast now."

They felt extremely anxious over the result now, for as there was very little of the explosive powder left, they knew that their fate depended upon the result of the blast.

Frank touched the bored ends of the wires to a pair of binding posts.

Almost the same instant the powder was exploded.

Such a roar as followed was appalling.

Far as the machine was from the center of activity, she was pelted by numerous flying fragments of the boulder.

The report almost deafened Frank's crew, and the concussion fairly drove back the electric wagon.

It was all over in a moment, however, and the inmates of the wagon scrambled to their feet.

"Ahead wid her, Frank."

"Don't let your hopes rise till we see the result," warned the inventor. "You may be doomed to bitter disappointment."

"We can't know the worst too soon," said the reporter, grimly.

"Very well; here she goes."

And he made the Snap fairly fly.

When she reached the rock, their faces changed to a look of black despair, for the big object had not been moved.

They thought it would have been blown to atoms, but instead, they saw only a goodly quantity of the stone torn out of one side lying scattered upon the floor.

"Lost!" exclaimed Nick, dolefully.

"We'll niver git out av this now," added Barney bitterly.

"Now whut yo' gwine ter do?" queried the coon.

"Going out to examine the rock," Frank answered.

"Faix, it will do yez no good."

"I'm not satisfied yet."

Frank alighted as he spoke.

He was gone nearly five minutes.

Upon returning he made no comment, but starting the Snap, he rove her along the face of the wall.

Then he suddenly turned her into a wide fissure.

And in one minute she was through the rock.

The others were amazed.

As soon as they recovered they went wild.

"Hurroo!" yelled Barney, waving his cap and dancing up and down in the exuberance of his joy. "Beheavens, we're saved!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" screamed Pomp and Nick.

They could hardly believe their good luck.

Frank was delighted too, for had he been under a severe mental strain over the peril of their situation.

"I thought that the amount of blasting we did should have warranted a better showing," said the inventor, "and it did not take me long to discover that opening. The big boulder was split in two as if by a giant ax, and the opening was fortunately big enough to admit of our passage, as I found out when I measured it."

"That powder of yours is wonderful," said Nick.

"Yes—it is very expansive."

"Did you invent it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wouldn't care to get hit by a shot of it."

The wagon raced along at a lively pace, the whole crew rejoicing over their deliverance from the trouble they were in.

Several hours passed by uneventfully, and they noticed that the higher they climbed the cooler the air became.

"The temperature has fallen 20 degrees," said Frank.

"In two hours more it will be supportable," Nick answered.

Barney was taking the greatest care of the search-lights, managing the reflectors to the greatest advantage.

"There do be less mist up here, I notice," he remarked.

"Yes," added Pomp; "an' dem 'splosions sound furdur away, too."

An interval of silence ensued for an hour.

Then the Irishman suddenly asked in a startled way:

"What's that?"

"I don't see anything unusual," said Frank.

"Kape yer oye on the ind av ther loight."

The inventor watched keenly.

A faint shadow seemed to flit across the light.

"It must be the flickering of the current," he remarked.

"Do it take on the forrum av a man?"

"Your fancy must have deceived you."

"Devil a bit, I'm no dhramer."

Frank glanced forward once more with a puzzled expression, and again beheld the flitting form.

It was followed by several more.

"Ah! There it is again!" he exclaimed.

"I see it," said Barney, nodding.

"Looks like several men."

"An' so it is, sor."

"Yes—yes. I see them distinctly now."

"Ain't they some av thim putty-faced giants?"

"No doubt of it?"

As the machine drew still closer to them all doubt about their identity was at once removed.

Pomp and the reporter easily distinguished the figures of half a dozen of the big fellows running along in advance of the vehicle, and they went almost as fast as the Snap.

Frank pondered over the matter a few moments, and then said:

"I'll bet those people have been following and keeping a strict watch of us ever since they first saw the wagon."

"Arrah, there can be no taste av a doubt about it," replied Barney, "for as they're used ter livin' in this sink av the devil, they can shtaud ther awful heat, an' feel no inconvenience from it."

"We are gradually overtaking them," remarked Nick, "and if we keep on at the present rate, in an hour we'll reach them."

"Let's catch one," suggested Pomp.

"What for?" queried the inventor.

"Question him about de tribe."

"That's brilliant—how will you make them understand you?"

"I dunno," blankly replied Pomp, and the rest laughed.

Within a short time the passage narrowed so that it was a very easy matter to keep the runners in plain view, for the search-lights then flooded them with the powerful rays.

In due time the vehicle drew close to them.

But presently some broad fissures in the wall were seen, and the runners turned into them and disappeared.

"Now where have they gone?" asked Frank.

"Let's stop the wagon and find out," replied the reporter.

"Och, sure they're only holdin'," said Barney in disgust.

"Doan' yo' be too suah about dat," said the coon; "dem yere big fellers ain't afraid ob nuffin' but de 'lectricity."

"To tell you the truth," said Frank, stopping his invention and staring sharply at the fissures, "I'm curious about that place myself."

"Do you see anything unusual?" asked Nick.

"Yes; far in that middle opening there's a fire."

"Why, that's the opening most of them entered."

"You can see they ain't hiding in the passage now."

"No; there's nothing between us and that fire."

"Well, I'm going into the opening to find out the cause of the fire."

"Shall I go with you?"

"Yes, if you wish."

"We'd better arm ourselves."

"You are right. There's no telling what danger we may encounter."

Each took a revolver and a knife, left the wagon, and passed into the fissure, watched by the negro and the Irishman.

Both of the latter individuals wanted to go too, but the inventor did not consider it safe to leave the wagon unguarded.

Frank found the fissure both wide and high.

The floor was smooth and firm, as if it had been walked over a great deal, and the passage was almost straight.

"Proceed with great caution, and be prepared for an attack at any moment," whispered Frank, as they glided through the opening. "These people are evidently anxious to have our lives, as you are aware, and only the utmost care on our part can save us from meeting with a violent death at their hands."

"You can just bet that I've got both eyes and ears wide open, and if they catch me napping, it will be because I'm in the walking trance," replied Nick with a short laugh.

In a few minutes they reached the end of the passage and saw an enormous cavern ahead, in the middle of which there was a huge hole in the floor.

The light they had seen was a natural conflagration, which poured up from the depths of the earth through this well.

It was simply natural gas in a state of combustion.

It brilliantly illuminated the chamber, and showed Frank that there was a large number of stone houses built in the place.

They were one storied edifices of an Egyptian style of architecture, having enormous doors and windows, while the stones were ornamented with rich carvings of a beautiful but peculiar design.

They had every appearance of great age, and were thronged with men, women and children of the gigantic Albino race, all of whom were jabbering excitedly in a peculiar language.

Here and there great shafts of stone like monoliths rose from the floor, and off to the left there was a high pyramid of stone blocks rising to a height of fifty feet.

Upon the top there burned a weird light, and several men were circling around it, chanting a most singular melody.

CHAPTER XI.

CAST INTO A SERPENT'S DEN.

"Nick, they are fire-worshippers."

"Isn't that an ancient Aztec religion?"

"Yes, and these people must be a remnant of that race."

"But the Aztecs were red-skinned."

"The Africans are black, yet Albinos originated in Africa."

"You think, then, these people are Albino-Aztecs?"

"I do."

"Why—simply on account of that religious rite?"

"Not entirely. Glance at their utensils and houses."

"What of them?"

"They are the same style as the Aztecs used."

"You don't say."

"It's a fact."

"But why do they dwell under ground?"

"History tells us that the advance of civilization, since the conquest of Mexico by Hernando Cortez, drove the ancient tribes of this region before it. Pressed further away by the attacks of Indians and everyone opposed to them, the Aztecs scattered. Once the most powerful and flourishing race in this part of the world, they have gradually been wiped out of existence. Some of them, went down into the Isthmus of Panama—others further—to South America. But few remained here. And they, to escape the rapacity of their enemies, hid in forests, swamps, and caves. Hence the existence of these people here."

"I see."

"Knowing that the hands of all nations were turned against them, and desperate at the prospect of being disturbed in this forlorn retreat,

It is no wonder these people are opposed to the trespassing of strangers within their last stronghold. It is no wonder the savages kill all who threaten their existence. I'm not surprised at the jealousy with which they guard their retreat. They are not to be blamed. This cave naturally belongs to them. They want no repetition of the old massacres. Living quietly here, disturbing no one, and only wanting to be left in peaceful possession of their abode, it is no wonder they look upon us with distrust and anger."

"If our ancestors were as generous-minded as you are," said Nick, in dry tones, "the Western Hemisphere would not yet be conquered, and the great civilization of America would be unknown."

"Very true," assented Frank, "but it so happened that our ancestors were merciless, and paved the way through rivers of human blood so that we could enjoy the prosperity of their labors."

As he gave utterance to this remark, his quick ears caught the faint sound of footsteps approaching.

Glancing back over his shoulder into the passage, he saw the figures of a large number of men approaching from the rear.

Grasping Nick's arm, he exclaimed:

"We are trapped!"

"How?" was the startled rejoinder.

"There are some men coming behind us."

"Ah—I see them by the electric light back of them."

"We must either enter the cave or fight."

"But we can't fight in this fissure, Frank!"

"No—not well."

"And to enter the cave means to expose ourselves."

"Still, we'll have more room there."

"It's our only chance."

"This is like being between two fires."

"How shall we act?"

"Suit yourself."

"Then come into the cave."

"Go on; I'll follow."

They glided from the passage.

Glancing around for a place of concealment, Frank saw several more fissures opening into the cavern.

He was going to suggest entering one of them, when out from the other openings poured a large number of the Albinos.

Frank then suspected the truth of the matter.

"It's a prearranged job!" he exclaimed.

"I don't understand your meaning," said Nick.

"Don't you? Then listen: We've been watched. A large party of the Albinos must have been lurking in concealment out in the big passage. They saw us enter here and followed us to guard against our retreat."

"Don't you think there's an avenue of escape?"

"No; not unless we make one by fighting."

"Good gracious! what a situation to be placed in!"

"Hold your pistol in readiness—they see us."

"Going to fire at them?"

"Only if they threaten our lives."

Nick nodded and drew his revolver from his belt.

Placing their backs against the stone wall, they watched the giants, who now gave utterance to their strange cries, attracting the attention of all the village people.

Then there was a grand rush at the two explorers.

The white fellows came from all sides.

There were over one hundred of them, and there wasn't a man in the crowd who did not carry a weapon of some sort.

All these arms were of the crudest pattern.

The war clubs were made of notched wood, the axes were of obsidian stone, and the spears had flint heads bound to the shafts.

Some of them carried stone shields on their arms.

With such primitive weapons as these, Frank could not imagine upon what kind of food they subsisted, for there was no evidence of flesh animals in the cave and no sun to raise crops.

They probably left the cave to get food, or procured fish from the subterranean streams and lakes.

As they rushed toward the explorers they made no outcry, but the manner in which they flourished their weapons left no doubt in our friends' minds that they intended to use them.

When Frank and Nick raised their pistols the savages did not flinch, from which the inventor deduced that they were ignorant of what the fire-arms were.

"Ready to fire?" asked Nick.

"Not yet," said the inventor. "See what they'll do."

"I know."

"What?"

"Beat our brains out."

"Now—watch!"

Arrived close, the Albinos raised their clubs.

In a moment more both would have been hit.

"Fire!" cried Frank, quickly.

Bang!

Bang!

Sharply the two reports pealed out.

Down fell the leaders with cries of pain.

"Again!"

Bang!

Bang!

Startled by the flashes and reports, the rest halted.

It surprised them to see their companions fall.

"We've startled them, Nick."

"By Jove, we may escape yet."

"Keep them moving!"

"Going to drop them?"

"Yes—fire!"

Bang!

Bang!

The two last shots weakened the Albinos.

Wavering a moment, they began to retreat.

Six of them had fallen wounded, and were now screaming to their companions to aid them.

Frank thought he would get away.

Unluckily though, the men on the pyramid—probably priests—now began to yell at the people below.

Their words made them rally.

Once more they charged on Frank.

It was a fierce, irresistible attack, and although the two gallant fellows rapidly discharged their pistols, they fought in vain.

They were overwhelmed by the superior force of numbers, and received several savage, cruel blows that felled them.

Senseless, they were at the mercy of their foes, and the Albinos pounced upon them with tigerish ferocity and bore them away in triumph.

When Frank recovered his senses he had a bruised lump on his forehead as big as an egg, where a war club struck him, and his arms were bound behind his back with pieces of a tough slender vine.

Close by sat Nick, similarly bound, staring at him intently.

They were both in the bottom of a circular pit, fifty feet in diameter, the floor and walls being built of solid masonry.

It was open at the top, and he noticed that there was a black hole in the wall at one side, where a block of stone had been removed.

A fire blazing on the upper ground cast a fitful glow into the pit, and he observed that all the Albinos were lying on the ground around the edge of the pit above, staring down at them intently.

"Hello, Nick—I see you're alive yet!"

"Oh, yes, but I've got a sore head."

"What were we put in here for?"

"I'm blest if I can understand it!"

"Are you bound, too?"

"Yes—as tight as a drum!"

"Queer how those chaps are staring down at us."

"Very—I can't make out their design at—"

But just then there came a sudden interruption in the form of a prolonged hiss, not unlike that of a steam valve.

It attracted the attention of the pair toward the black opening in the wall, and they were horrified to see an enormous serpent, looking like a boa constrictor, come crawling out into the pit.

The truth of the matter then flashed across Frank's mind.

"Now I understand it!" he exclaimed.

"Good Lord—look at that reptile!" gasped Nick, turning pale.

"Its den probably adjoins this pit. Those fellows have evidently put us in here to serve as a meal for that monster."

"Heaven help us then, for we are at its mercy!" groaned Nick.

CHAPTER XII.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER.

With a feeling of unutterable horror, Frank and the reporter watched the sinuous movements of the great snake.

It drew its coils from the dark hole, until at last the whole body was in the den.

Beautiful, but terrible, it lay there a few moments, fully thirty feet in length, and no less than six inches in girth.

Its small black eyes sparkled with a dangerous fire as it swept its glance around the circular den.

The creature was ravenous with hunger.

It had not eaten anything in four months.

"Those fiends could scarcely have devised a worse form of death for us," said the inventor, resentfully. "It would not have been so bad to have been killed while fighting."

"They are simply diabolical," said Nick, angrily.

"I won't submit to this sort of taking off without a struggle."

"What can you do to resist, bound as we are?"

"Do you notice that we yet retain our knives?"

"Yes, but what good are they? We can't use them."

"Oh, yes, we can."

"Don't get up any false hopes, my boy."

"I don't intend to."

"Then what in thunder are you driving at?"

"Come over here and I'll show you."

The reporter rose wonderingly and approached his companion.

As he sat down beside Frank, he asked:

"Have you got a plan in view that will aid us?"

"Yes. We must get our hands free first."

"Well?"

"Then we can use our knives on the snake."

"I can't see how—"

"Here—I'll show you."

Getting behind Nick, the young inventor seized the bonds with his teeth, and by dint of the most skillful pulling and hauling he finally managed to unfasten the knots.

Instantly the vines fell from Nick's arms, and Frank exclaimed:

"Now you're free!"

"Jingo! You're a genius!"

"Now draw your knife and cut my lashings."

The reporter obeyed, and the men who were watching them gave utterance to a shout of anger that startled the big snake.

It showed its uneasiness by beginning to crawl swiftly across the stone floor, and then it caught view of the prisoners.

Instantly it reared up its head, darted its tongue in and out of its mouth, and began that subliminal hissing again.

"There's going to be trouble now," exclaimed Frank.

"You bet there is. Do you see how those duffers up above are trying to anger it by throwing stones down at it?"

"They are impatient for the monster to attack us."

"Confound them. They mean to get square with us for the wounds we gave the fellows we shot."

The snake now came crawling swiftly across the floor toward them, for the Albinos had irritated it to a high pitch of fury.

Frank and his companion had their knives in readiness for defense, and awaited the attack.

It came like lightning.

The serpent darted forward with incredible speed.

Its attack was directed at Frank.

He had barely raised his knife when the monster whizzed around him, and he took a step backward, but was too late to prevent it wrapping several coils about him.

One arm was pinioned to his side.

A shout of approval came from the Albinos.

"Nick!" gasped the inventor, appealingly.

"I'll help you!" was the brave reply.

In an instant more the hideous head of the snake swung around in front of Frank's face.

The folds of its body began to contract.

The pressure made Frank's bones nearly crack.

He felt as if he were in the jaws of a vise, and his breath was squeezed from his lungs, and the blood rushed to his head.

He yet had his knife-hand free.

"How quick it moves!" he thought. "By heavens, it will compress life out of me if I don't act fast."

And he lunged down at the coils.

A fearful gash was cut in the reptile's body.

It caused a sudden painful contraction of the mighty coils, and then they relaxed for a moment.

That gave Frank a chance to breathe freely.

Just then Nick rushed in and buried his knife in the serpent, cutting another fearful gash.

Around swung its tail, and it caught the young man a blow with the force of a sledge hammer, knocking him clear across the pit and landing him against the wall.

The next moment the snake swung around the inventor's body again, and forming another coil it bound his knife-hand to his side with crushing force.

He felt as if his last moment had come, for he could not do a thing then to help himself.

The snake had its wicked eyes fastened upon him with a glaring and fascinating look, from which he could not remove his gaze.

It swayed its head from side to side with a slow, undulating motion, and began to contract its body again.

The impression on Frank was awful.

His face turned purple.

His eyes bulged out, and the veins in his face swelled as if they would burst.

Within a few moments his lungs were almost collapsed, and he felt his senses deserting him.

At this critical juncture Nick attacked the snake again.

His sharp knife slashed at it with precision and rapidity, and the agonized reptile, cut in a score of places, began to uncoil from Frank and dropped to the ground.

As it was unwinding, Nick made a terrific pass at its neck, and it caught the knife blade with its teeth.

Those deadly fangs could not retain a grip on the hard steel, however, and as he wrenched it away the reptile's mouth was cut.

It was in a panic.

Frank reeled faint and gasping against the wall.

The serpent squirmed and thrashed around furiously.

It coiled and uncoiled, its long body was contracted, bent and twisted into all shapes, it banged up and down, and it whirled around and around in a perfect frenzy.

Seeing that it no longer menaced them, Nick rushed up to the inventor, seized him, peered anxiously into his face, and cried:

"Frank! Frank! Rouse yourself."

"Yes—yes! I'm all right!" gasped the inventor.

"We've given it the deadly quietus."

"Have you killed it?"

"Not quite."

"Where's my knife?"

"Here. You dropped it."

Frank seized the weapon and located the serpent.

He had recovered now, and rushing up to the writhing object, he watched eagerly for a chance to kill it.

With a spasmodic effort the creature darted at him again as if it had an insane desire to kill him.

Its big mouth was wide open.

Frank knew how swiftly it moved.

He therefore acted faster than the reptile.

Flinging himself to one side he slashed at its head.

The blade gashed over its neck and severed the head from the body.

"That settles it!" he exclaimed.

A howl of chagrin escaped the spectators above.

The young inventor had to move lively to get out of the way of those thrashing coils, or the loathsome object would have beaten him to a jelly.

The convulsions of the enormous body after it was decapitated were even more violent than when the head was on.

Indeed, it kept the two explorers dodging rapidly to avoid getting hit, as it beat all around the pit.

Infuriated at being baffled, the Albinos now began to hurl big stones down at the two prisoners.

"Look! They are going to stone us to death!" cried Frank, as a missile dealt him a stinging blow. "Run, Nick!"

"How can we escape them?"

"Crawl into the snake's den."

"There may be another serpent there."

"We must risk that."

Rushing across the pit, they crept into the black aperture feeling anything but a sense of security.

But they were protected from the flying stones.

"We are secure here," Frank muttered with a sigh.

"Temporarily, if there are no more snakes."

"Well, it's some relief."

"Yes, but those scoundrels will soon come down in the pit and root us out of here, you can depend."

"They've stopped throwing stones now."

They listened intently, but did not hear a sound.

Every moment they strained their vision in an effort to pierce the gloom behind them, for they both felt apprehensive that there might be another snake in that black hole.

It was a trying ordeal.

Both were brave fellows, though, and they clutched their knives tightly, and had their minds made up to fight desperately ere giving up their lives.

Quarter of an hour passed by.

The silence became oppressive.

Still they watched and waited, for they knew not what.

How they were to get out of this desperate plight they had not the remotest idea.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

The coon and the Celt remained silent for some time after Frank and Nick had gone, and maintained a strict watch over the electric engine.

None of the ghostly Albinos were seen, however, and with a very solemn look upon his face, Barney turned to his companion and said:

"Pomp, I do be tinkin'."

"So is I, honey," answered the ducky, gravely.

"I tink they should have had us wid 'em."

"Dat am jes' ma idea, Barney."

"It's afeerd I am they'll have throuble."

"Amn't it funny we bofe link de same fing?"

"That's bekaze both av us have the great heads."

"S'posen I follow dem, Barney."

"Faith, I was just goin' ter say ther same."

"One ob us mus' stay heah."

"Av coorse."

"Which shall it be?"

"You, ter be sure."

"Orright—den yo' go."

"Give me a gun."

The Irishman hastily armed himself.

He then sallied out, and plunging into one of the passages, he disappeared.

Barney was gone a long time, but when he came back, it was with a wild rush, and his face was as pale as death.

"Pomp!" he cried.

"What ails yo', chile?"

"Frank and Nick is captured."

"G'way!"

"They've be'n knocked silly."

"Oh, gosh amighty."

An' thim spalpeens have chooked thim into a hole in the ground, an' let loose a shnake a mile long ter ait thim alovel!"

"Lord sakes—yo' doan' say!"

"Git some av thim bombs, an' we'll tackle ther gang, an' see if we can't save ther poor fellies."

Pomp rushed to the storeroom and secured a dozen hand grenades.

While he was gone Barney electrified the wagon so that any one who tried to get aboard would get severely shocked.

Then they both alighted and rushed away.

"Did yo' see all yo' tole me?" asked the coon as they hurried along.

"I did. They're in a big cave ahead there. I crep' in an' got up on a high ledge from where I could see ther hull place widout bein' seen meself, an' I saw all I towld you awhole ago."

"How was it you wasn't seen, honey?"

"Simply cause ther hull gang av blackguards wor gathered roun' ther pit watchin' what Frank an' ther reporther wor a doin'."

"Yo' s'pose de snake gwine fo' ter eat dem up?"

"I hope not, me bye."

"An' I hope we git dar in time ter save dem."

In a few minutes they reached the big cavern. Just as they arrived a furious yelling was going on, and the natives were hurling stones down into the pit.

"D'you moind that?" gasped Barney.

"Wha' day peggin' dem stuns at?"

"Masther Frank, av coorse, bad luck to thim."

"Le's scatter dem, Barney."

"Dhroive a bomb at ther rascals."

The coon hurled one of the grenades.

It shot through the air, and struck in the midst of the crowd.

A terrible explosion followed.

Then there was a wild stampede.

As the cave dwellers rushed away in all directions, tumbling over each other in their haste to get out of the way, it was seen that over a dozen had fallen wounded by the fragments of the burst shell.

"Here goes another wan!" roared Barney.

Boom! thundered the shot.

The confusion increased, and while more of the Albinos fell the rest set up an awful outcry.

Then the coon and Irishman rushed into the cavern.

Seeing how and by whom they were attacked, the natives made a mad rush for the back of the cave.

Two more destructive bombs followed them, and burst with detonations that shook the cabin from floor to roof.

Away swarmed the now thoroughly frightened natives.

There was an exit at the rear, through which they all rushed in a fever of anxiety to get out of range of those appalling bombs.

"Pomp, rope them in there."

"Orright, Barney."

"I'm a goin' ter git our friends out av the hole."

"Gib me de grenades."

The coon posted himself near the exit, and hurled an explosive in after the retreating natives to keep them on the move.

Barney rushed to the edge of the pit.

"Hey, Frank!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

"Barney—is that you?" came a smothered reply.

"Yis; where are ye?"

"Down here!"

And the reporter and inventor crept out of the snake's den, and the troubled Irishman saw them, and cried:

"Hurry up!"

"Did you attack them?"

"We did, an' begorra we've dhriv thim out."

"I heard the bombs bursting."

"How will ye cloimb ther wall?"

"By gettin' up on Dick's shoulders."

It was no easy job to get out of the pit, for it was fully ten feet deep, but when Frank did it, he and Barney hauled Nick up.

"Come on, Pomp!" sang out the Celt.

"Fust I gib dem a partin' reminder," replied the coon.

He let a bomb fly into the passage.

As it exploded there, the four rushed across the cavern, and reaching the fissures, they dashed into one.

Some distance ahead they saw the figures of some of the Albinos who had returned from an expedition, coming toward them.

One bomb sufficed to drive them back at a rush, and then the whole party hastened forward and got out of the crevice.

They found the Snap intact.

Barney boarded her, and cut out the current, after which the others followed him, and then the door was shut and locked.

Then they spent some time discussing what had transpired.

Afterwards they drove the machine forward, and she pressed ahead steadily, without any further trouble from the natives.

On the following day they passed through the shallow lake, and then reached the ancient gold mine.

Frank stopped the wagon there.

"I'm going to locate this spot," he explained to his companions, "and after we are back in civilization, we can take steps to work the mine so it will yield us a good return for all the trouble we've been having."

This plan pleased the others.

Accordingly, the most careful and accurate measures were taken to locate the spot from the surface.

When this was done and the result recorded in a book, Frank said:

"I've got it now, and we can go ahead and get out of here within a very short space of time. Then for the trip home."

The rest were pleased to hear this announcement, for they had undergone so many privations since they entered the big hole in the ground that they were glad of the prospect of getting out of it.

A few hours later they reached the entrance cavern.

A thrill of delight pervaded them when the Snap dashed out into the glorious sunlight of the upper world.

For a time they were nearly blinded by the light after their long experience in the gloom of the subterranean passage.

They soon became accustomed to the light, however, and then the young inventor remarked:

"Oh, how sweet the light of day is! No one can realize it so much as a person who has long been deprived of it. I feel as if I had come from a dungeon to live once again."

This sentiment was felt by all the rest, and the wagon was driven away through the ravine at a high rate of speed.

Frank headed for the Southern Pacific railroad, and after a pleasant journey they reached a way station.

Here the machine was taken apart, and having procured some they packed her up and shipped her home.

The whole party departed in the same train.

After a long ride over the continent, they finally reached Readestown, and found a glad welcome awaiting them.

Here Nick parted with Frank's party and went to New York.

He had written a voluminous account of their adventures for his paper, and it is safe to say he made an unprecedented record for himself with the publishers of his articles.

In due time Frank organized a mining expedition, and begun to work the great Montezuma claim.

It yielded richly, and was finally bought up by an English syndicate at a tremendous figure.

The money thus realized was equally divided among the four, and each one was greatly enriched.

Frank then returned to his native town with Barney and Pomp, and there set his fertile mind to work at inventing again.

The result was, he planned another peculiar contrivance.

It was a most wonderful invention.

And it was destined to lead the young wizard of Readestown into the most perilous adventures he had ever experienced.

We have no space here to give an account of what befell Frank, but have another story in preparation, in which we have embodied all his remarkable adventures.

So we must here part with the three devoted friends, and as our tale is concluded, we will simply add:

[THE END.]

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